Unconventionality and Judgment in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

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Introduction

As an author, Thomas Hardy is known for his harsh critique and portrayal of Victorian society. His work was not always well received in his time, given his tendency to write controversial characters from a tragic and sympathetic perspective. One novel in particular, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, was especially ill received by Victorian society, given the sympathetic tone the narrator has for Tess, despite the fact that she is a fallen woman. Throughout the novel Hardy is adamant in his claim that Tess should be seen as pure, as made most plain by the novel's subtitle, "A Pure Woman." Hardy wants readers to immediately associate Tess with the image of purity, and by making "A Pure Woman" the novel's subtitle, Hardy is ensuring that readers will already believe Tess is pure prior to the novel's onset. As a result, when Tess becomes a fallen woman, readers are shocked given how she is initially labeled. Hardy still feels this label is suitable, thus insinuating that Tess cannot be faulted for the event since she had no accountability in her rape.

This sympathy and advocacy for Tess is evident throughout the novel as well, as shown by the narrator's tone when describing the events that transpire in Tess's life. At the end of the novel for example, once Tess is killed, the narrator states: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess" (Hardy 397). By putting the word "justice" in quotation marks, Hardy is indicating the irony of the word in this instance. It is evident that both he and the narrator do not agree with society's definition of justice, because it is not truly just that Tess is killed. This open critique occurs at the end of the novel, after Tess has become a fallen woman and murdered Alec out of desperation. This illustrates that Hardy is not

only sympathetic towards Tess as a fallen woman, but also towards Tess as a murderer. From Hardy's perspective, the murder could have been preventable had society not been so quick to deem Tess an outcaste. Hardy does not feel Tess can be faulted for her actions because the confining nature of society is what has driven her to murder.

Just as Hardy's compassion is clear through his treatment of Tess and her struggles, it is also plain through his handling of Jude in *Jude the Obscure*. In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude is a lower-class individual, desperate to study at Christminster. However, Jude never achieves his dreams because society has made it impossible for him to break free from his lower-class identity. While Jude is sitting outside of Christminster, admiring and longing to go inside the gates, the narrator describes the buildings: "They had done nothing but wait, and had become poetical. How easy to the smallest building; how impossible to most men" (Hardy, 102). This description shows the sympathy that the narrator feels for Jude and his struggles. By describing the buildings as poetic, and juxtaposing this with the notion that most men are unable to reach that potential, the narrator is indicating that Jude cannot be faulted for his inability to achieve his goals. Rather, it is the cruel nature of society that makes certain goals unattainable for specific groups of people.

After seeing Hardy's sympathy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, readers are left to wonder about Hardy's apparent lack of sympathy in his novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. When read on its own, the narrator's unsympathetic tone towards the protagonist Henchard is not surprising given that Henchard's actions throughout the novel, especially during the wife-sale, make it difficult for one to feel

compassion for him. However, when reading this novel in the context of Hardy's other works, the narrator's criticism of Henchard is peculiar. Why would Hardy choose to paint such a negative portrayal of Henchard from the beginning of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, when he strives so hard to paint a positive portrayal of Tess in the beginning of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*? How is it possible that a writer who is sympathetic to a pitiful lower-class man and a murdering fallen woman is not sympathetic to a reformed alcoholic?

Accordingly, the narrator's excessive criticism of Henchard must serve a greater purpose. Just as Hardy uses the subtitle of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* to try to shape readers' opinions of Tess, Hardy is trying to engineer readers' perspectives surrounding the characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as well. Whereas in Tess, this manipulation of readers' perspectives is blatant, given Hardy's desire to invoke sympathy from readers, the subtitle of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* operates more subtly. The results of Hardy's decision to create this complex and critical narrator are two fold. Firstly, it creates a distance between the narrator and the story-world that is necessary for the narrator to be able to take such a critical lens. Secondly, by creating this distance between the narrator and the story-world, Hardy is actually minimizing the distance between the narrator and the readers. Readers feel they can trust the narrator's perspective given how removed he is from the characters, and thus, are prone to agree with the narrator's viewpoints. Therefore, Hardy is actually engineering the readers' judgment from the novel's onset. The question then becomes: Why does Hardy seek to shape the readers' perspective, rather than allow them to draw their own conclusions? Is it because he does not trust readers to come up with the proper conclusions without

guidance, as seems to be the case in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*? Or is there a greater purpose for this subtle manipulation?

Hardy's fraught relationship with his readers is well known. He resented critics for misunderstanding him as a writer and constantly condemned society for its narrow-mindedness. Therefore, the notion that Hardy is seeking to engineer the readers' judgments to better support his own opinions is not surprising. In my thesis I will explore how Hardy uses narration and characterization to shape the readers' thoughts and perspectives in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, as well as why he deemed this necessary to achieve his overall purpose of creating an unconventional and highly moral work. Essentially, by recognizing the subtle techniques Hardy employs to influence his readers, the true complexity of Hardy's writings begins to unfold, and Hardy's overall place in literary history finally becomes clear to individuals.

Unconventional Beginnings

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is, at its roots, a story about the downfall of a flawed man. At the novel's opening when readers are first introduced to Michael Henchard and his family, Henchard and Susan strained relationship becomes apparent: "What was really peculiar, however, in this couple's progress, and would have attracted the attention of any casual observer otherwise disposed to overlook them, was the perfect silence they preserved" (Hardy 2). Prior to even learning the couple's names, readers learn about the bleak state of their marriage. They choose to walk in silence rather than speak to one another, indicating how little they enjoy being together. As the scene progresses, it becomes clear that the silence the couple is

sharing is not the result of one argument but rather years of discontent. Readers are soon able to assign blame for the reason behind the dreary state of their relationship, given the fact that upon arrival at the fair, Henchard immediately proceeds to get drunk, despite his wife's objections. Henchard then ignores his wife's concern regarding their need for lodgings, and continues to drink, eventually becoming combative (Hardy 7). The tension between them culminates at the end of the chapter, when Henchard begins to proposition men at the bar to buy his wife from him. Susan's first assumption is that Henchard is kidding, given that he has asked individuals to buy her prior to this incident, but when she mentions this to Henchard, he immediately becomes combative and clarifies how serious he is: "'A joke? Of course it is not a joke!' shouted her husband, his resentment rising at her suggestion. 'I take the money: the sailor takes you. That's plain enough'" (Hardy 12). At the end of the scene, readers are left dumbfounded by Henchard's actions. It becomes clear that he is not only a belligerent drunk, but also a cruel, impulsive man who does not value his family. The fact that Henchard is willing to humiliate, and then sell, his wife at auction, immediately causes readers to distrust and dislike him.

While this viewpoint of Henchard is founded, one cannot help but wonder why Hardy chooses to introduce his protagonist in this negative way. By beginning the novel with such an extreme action, Hardy is intentionally making it incredibly difficult for readers to like the protagonist, regardless of the events later in the novel. Due to the way Hardy's narrator chooses to introduce the main character, to readers Henchard will never be anything more than a pathetic alcoholic that sold his wife at a fair.

After this encounter, the narrator skips the next ten years of Henchard's life and reintroduces him to readers as an entirely changed man. Readers are thrust into Henchard's new life without any indication of how he has transformed. Unlike in the beginning of the novel, when readers are introduced to Henchard through the narrator's perspective, readers are now introduced to Henchard through a townsperson's perspective in a discussion she is having concerning the Mayor: "'Why, my good maid, [Henchard's] the powerfullest member of the Town Council, and quite a principal man in the country round besides'" (Hardy 39). In his new life as Mayor of Casterbridge, Henchard is known as an honorable and important self-made man. The drunk who sold his wife is gone and in his place is a noble man who has sworn off alcohol. This drastically different image of Henchard causes a lot of confusion for readers. It makes readers wonder how they should label Henchard in their minds because they are left unsure which depiction of Henchard is the more accurate account. This confusion is increased given that readers are never able to learn how Henchard changed his life. After the first two chapters, Hardy abruptly reintroduces Henchard at the height of success, which makes it challenging for readers to find Henchard's transformation plausible. Since readers never see Henchard struggling to better himself, and never witness him feeling regretful for his former actions, it is hard for them to believe he has truly transformed.

Additionally, we cannot sympathize with Henchard because he is only presented to us as two extremes. At first, Henchard is a volatile man who is unworthy of sympathy, since he is the cause of his own struggles, and later, he is a highly successful man who does not need sympathy because he apparently does not have any struggles. In both

instances, Hardy makes it difficult for readers to identify with Henchard because of how severe he is as a character. It is hard to fathom that an individual could ever seek to sell his wife, and even harder to believe that this individual could later become a beloved town mayor. Readers do not appreciate Henchard's transformation because it does not seem conceivable that such an unsympathetic individual could be so highly regarded. When Hardy skips over the period of Henchard's life in which he is rebuilding himself, Hardy is intentionally making Henchard's transformation less plausible. Thus, since readers doubt Henchard's transformation, they are also distrustful of Henchard as a character, since they still view him in the negative way they did in the first chapters.

Thus, the question of why Hardy introduces Henchard in this way is still present in readers' minds. The entire novel, apart from the first two chapters, takes place ten years after the fair, so the logic behind Hardy's decision to begin with the events surrounding the fair is confusing for readers. Perhaps it would have made more sense for Hardy to begin the novel with the primary storyline, in which Henchard is introduced as Mayor, so that readers first see him at the height of his success. Then readers would not have to cope with the abrupt shift in the characterization of the mayor that occurs after the first two chapters of the novel. Readers could then learn about Henchard's past misgivings as a flashback later in the novel, or when the townspeople do, at the height of Henchard's downfall.

The Problem with Omniscience

Presumably, Hardy wants us to see Henchard in a negative light from the onset. If Hardy had exposed Henchard's past later in the novel, the narrator wouldn't have been able to get the readers to feel so strongly about their dislike for Henchard. By

introducing Henchard in a negative way, Hardy is ensuring that readers will always distrust Henchard. Without realizing it, readers have had their opinions shaped for them by Hardy. By introducing a wretched man to readers and never portraying him as the sympathetic man struggling to change his ways, Hardy dictates the readers' point of view, prior to their ever learning about the character of Henchard in its entirety. The narration surrounding Henchard's character and his choices further indicates this point. It becomes clear within the first two chapters that the narrator is biased, as made evident by the narrator's account of Henchard and Susan on their walk. When describing Henchard's actions he states:

> It could be discerned that the man was reading, or pretending to read, a ballad sheet which he kept before his eyes with some difficulty by the hand that was passed through the basket strap. Whether this apparent cause were the real cause, or whether it were an assumed one to escape an intercourse that would have been irksome to him, nobody but himself could have said precisely; but his taciturnity was unbroken, and the woman enjoyed no society whatever from his presence. (Hardy 2)

Upon first encounter, one trusts the narrator's account of the events and assumes that the narrator is simply unable to know Henchard's thoughts for certain. Thus, this passage affirms that the narrator is a trustworthy source because he takes into account multiple possibilities regarding the character's motives for his actions in order to accommodate his inability to know Henchard's thoughts. However, shortly after, the narrator's reliability is called into question, since it is clear that he knows for certain what Henchard is thinking:

> “Did I tell my name to anybody last night, or didn’t I tell my name?” he said to himself; and at last concluded that he did not. His general demeanor was enough to show how he was surprised and nettled that his wife had taken him so literally—as much as could be seen in face, and in the way he nibbled a straw which he pulled from the hedge. He knew that she must have been somewhat excited to do this; moreover, she must have believed that there was some sort of binding force in the transaction. On this latter point he felt almost certain. (Hardy 17)

In the beginning of the quote, the narrator attempts to make readers believe he is incapable of knowing Henchard’s feelings and motives. By using phrases such as “general demeanor” and “as much as could be seen” the narrator is indicating to readers that he cannot understand the full scope of Henchard’s thoughts. But upon further analysis, it becomes clear that the narrator is able to know Henchard’s full mind, and is only attempting to pretend he cannot. Firstly, the narrator narrates what Henchard is thinking to himself, indicating that the narrator knows Henchard’s thoughts. Additionally, later on, the narrator is able to know that Henchard thinks his wife is dumb and thus thinks that Susan believes that she is obliged to be with the sailor. This complex thought process cannot be indicated merely by “the way he nibbled a straw”, signifying that the narrator knows more about Henchard and his thoughts than he lets on to readers.

This also complicates the earlier narration surrounding Henchard’s walk with his wife. The narrator explores multiple possibilities surrounding Henchard’s simple act of reading the ballad sheet. By exploring the idea that Henchard is only pretending to read,

rather than actually reading the ballad sheet, the narrator is putting the thought in readers' heads that Henchard is cold and distant. Additionally, the only possibility the narrator explores for why Henchard would be pretending to read, is to avoid talking to his wife, whom he finds irritating. This pseudo-analysis of Henchard's character only serves to make readers dislike Henchard from the novel's onset. By later stating that "nobody but himself could have said precisely", the narrator is affirming that he does not actually know if any of his negative claims regarding Henchard are factual. Perhaps Henchard is actually reading the ballad sheet, or attempting to, in which case the excessive analysis concerning his motives for pretending to read is entirely unnecessary. Yet, readers never get to learn what Henchard is doing, or why, because the narrator does not wish readers to know. Since it is a third-person omniscient narrator, the lack of knowledge surrounding Henchard's actions is intentional. Therefore, one could argue that the narrator only mentions the other possibilities surrounding Henchard's actions with the sole intent of making readers dislike Henchard. This is shown by the fact that the narrator is unable to confirm his suspicions and criticisms, which an omniscient narrator would be able to do, if the suspicions were correct. Rather, the narrator uses words like "apparent" and "assumed", showing that the claims have no true merit.

Hardy is using the traditional technique of omniscient narration in a peculiar way. Rather than using an omniscient narrator to present a more clear and open interpretation of the story and its characters, Hardy is using the all-seeing narrator to manipulate the readers' point of view. By creating an omniscient narrator, Hardy is making it easy for readers to trust the narrator's point of view. Then by distorting the

narrator's omniscience, and having the narrator withhold information for the purpose of conjecture, Hardy is crafting the readers' suspicion of Henchard. Since the narrator, whom readers trust implicitly, surmises that Henchard is a manipulative man, readers believe he is too, despite the fact that, ironically, it is actually the narrator who is being manipulative in this instance.

In Paul Dawson's book *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-first Century Fiction*, Dawson explores the use of omniscient narration from eighteenth-century literature through contemporary literature. In his analysis Dawson explores the purpose of omniscient narration and notices it varies in different works:

> Another early appearance of the word "omniscience" is in an 1874 review of Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* by Henry James, who writes: "the author has evidently read to good purpose the low-life chapters in George Eliot's novels: he has caught very happily her trick of seeming to humour benignantly her queer people and look down on them from the heights of analytic omniscience" (85). Here an immanent, roving, all-knowing narrator is not emphasized so much as one who is able to analyze and judge from on high. (Dawson 37)

By this estimation, Hardy's choice to use omniscient narration extends beyond a desire for readers to learn what is going on inside the characters' minds. Instead, Dawson and James are arguing that the omniscient narration in *Far From the Madding Crowd* serves the primary purpose of critiquing the society and characters that Hardy has created.

Therefore, the omniscient narrator could be seen as a moral guide for readers to know how they should feel about the characters and events taking place in the story. However, what Dawson does not address in this analysis is the question of how readers should view a narrator that only judges specific characters, rather than an entire society. While omniscient narrators are often used as guides to shape readers' opinions of the society and characters they are reading about, what happens when the omniscient narrator that is doing this is excessively judgmental? Undoubtedly, in the case of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy uses an omniscient narrator to critique the characters and expose their flaws. But, unlike the case presented in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the omniscient narrator does not judge and critique all of the characters; instead, the narrator appears to single out Michael Henchard, while positively regarding the other characters, despite their many flaws.

A key example of this is the narrator's characterization of Donald Farfrae. When readers are introduced to Farfrae, it becomes clear almost immediately that he is someone that should be held in high esteem. Whereas before learning Henchard's name readers learn that he sold his wife, before learning Farfrae's name, readers learn that he helped Henchard solve Casterbridge's wheat problem, with no desire for recognition or reward. After Farfrae overhears Henchard argue that he cannot make the wheat wholesome again, Farfrae decides to intervene:

> When he heard Henchard's closing words, 'It can't be done,' he smiled impulsively, drew out his pocketbook, and wrote down a few words by the aid of the light of the window… 'Give this to the Mayor at once'…[Henchard] read the

> note slowly, and fell into thought, not moody, but fitfully intense, as that of a man who has been captured by an idea. (Hardy 42-43)

Thus, Farfrae's first action in the novel is one of apparent selflessness. He overhears the Mayor's dilemma and immediately seeks to solve it. He does not even wait for the Mayor to read the note, because he does not wish to get attention or money for his good deed. Yet, one could argue that he had wrong intentions in giving Henchard the note. When Farfrae decides to write the note, he gives an impulsive smile. This could be seen as an act of mocking, indicating that he finds it comical that the Mayor does not know how to solve his town's economic crisis, whereas he, a poor passing stranger, knows how. Additionally, this smile could be viewed as a display of Farfrae's arrogance regarding his knowledge of the corn and wheat industry. Seen in this light, the note he gives to the Mayor is not actually a kind act at all, and rather, it stems from Farfrae's desire to show that he is more knowledgeable than the Mayor. The fact that Farfrae does not wait for the Mayor to read the note is meant as a further indication of his authority—Farfrae waits for the Mayor to seek him out personally because then Farfrae becomes the person of power. Yet, unlike in the narrator's introduction to Henchard, the narrator never speculates about other alternatives for the character's actions because the narrator wants the readers to feel positively towards Farfrae. Additionally, the narrator ensures that readers will not interpret Farfrae negatively in this scene by the introduction he gives readers to Farfrae's character: "A young man of remarkably pleasant aspect…he was ruddy and of a fair countenance, bright-eyed" (Hardy 42). The narrator essentially tells readers their point of view of Farfrae before they meet Farfrae themselves. By immediately telling readers that he is "remarkably pleasant" the narrator

dispels all potentially negative readings of Farfrae's actions, because it would go against the initially positive introduction to Farfrae as a character.

The narrator's intent on portraying Farfrae in an entirely positive way is apparent throughout the novel. The narrator ensures that readers cannot interpret anything that Farfrae does as malicious. Another example of this is when Farfrae goes directly against Henchard in business. The narrator makes it clear that Farfrae never wished to compete with Henchard, but that Farfrae now does because he has no other choice: "A time came when, to avoid collision with his former friend as he might, Farfrae was compelled, in sheer self-defence, to close with Henchard in mortal commercial combat" (Hardy 132). The narrator's account of events is quick to fault Henchard for the business competition between the two men. The narrator makes it clear that Farfrae attempts to avoid competing with Henchard and that he reluctantly does so strictly out of self-preservation. The narrator does not leave it up to readers to decide who is at fault in their business competition, instead using phrases such as "sheer self-defence" to ensure that readers will interpret the scene in a way that that keeps Farfrae's good reputation intact. This is also made evident by the fact that the narrator neglects to inform readers of the events that transpire between the two men. The narrator informs readers that Farfrae acts out of self-defense, but does not inform readers about what Henchard does that requires Farfrae to begin to compete. Perhaps Henchard never actually acted in a way that would require Farfrae to suddenly begin competing with him, which is why the narrator does not include specific information. Nevertheless, the narrator is again withholding information, not because he is unaware of what has transpired, but because he does not wish readers to learn the information. Again

readers are left to trust the narrator's interpretation of events, although they are potentially misguided. Nevertheless, because the narrator has been engineering the readers' perspective throughout the novel, readers are unable to recognize their potentially problematic one-sided judgment of the two men. Thus, readers inevitably agree with the narrator and put Henchard at fault and leave Farfrae blame-free.

It is not until the end of the novel, once Henchard dies, that the narrator's viewpoint shifts and he questions Farfrae's kind acts for the first time. After Abel Whittle informs Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae that Henchard has died, Whittle gives them Henchard's will, which states that he does not wish his death to be recognized and does not want anyone to grieve for him. When the narrator describes Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane's treatment of Henchard's will, the narrator states:

> What Henchard had written in the anguish of his dying was respected as far as practicable by Elizabeth-Jane, though less from a sense of the sacredness of the last words, as such, than from her independent knowledge that the man who wrote them meant what he said. She knew the directions to be a piece of the same stuff that his whole life was made of, and hence were not to be tampered with to give herself a mournful pleasure, or her husband credit for large-heartedness. (Hardy 384-385)

By stating, on the novel's last page, that honoring Henchard would give Farfrae "credit", the narrator is indicating that if Farfrae had held a ceremony for Henchard, he would be doing so in order to gain respect from the rest of the community. By stating at the end of the novel that an apparently selfless act of Farfrae's would actually be done out of selfish motives, the narrator is subtly calling into question Farfrae's actions throughout

the novel. Thus, his initial action of fixing the town's wheat problem is again called into question, as well as his other actions of buying Henchard's furniture and standing up for Abel Whittle (Hardy 114, 262). For the first time in the novel, the narrator is outwardly questioning Farfrae's motives. Perhaps the narrator's previous remark, describing business competition as "mortal combat" could actually now be perceived as a subtle way to actually judge both men for their unnecessarily heightened concern with economic and social standing. Thus, by using terms like "self-defence" and "mortal combat" the narrator is actually mocking both men for how intensely they take their economic roles in society.

Nevertheless, the narrator does eventually critique Farfrae, but waits until the end of the novel to outwardly do so. This inconsistency is problematic for readers, who are now left to wonder how they are supposed to feel. For, after recognizing the sudden shift in the narrator's perspective, readers are confused about which perspective they should trust regarding the characters. Since the narration indicating that Farfrae cannot be trusted is minute within the context of the entire work, it is difficult for readers to adapt to that viewpoint. After adamantly following the narrator's inequitable point of view for the novel's entirety, readers are unable to shift their perspective. Hardy has done such a great job in engineering the readers' outlook that, when presented with alternative information and ideology at the end of the novel, their judgments cannot be altered. The question is then not why the narrator waits until the end of the novel to question Farfrae, but rather, what Hardy is attempting to highlight through the readers' reaction to this shift in perspective.

The Importance of Various Perspectives and Unreliable Narration

Just as the narration surrounding Farfrae's character at the end of the novel represents a shift from the rest of the novel, the narration surrounding the outcome of Farfrae's life is peculiar as well. While Farfrae does end up more successful than Henchard, it becomes clear that, like Henchard, Farfrae does not get an entirely happy ending. Although Farfrae is Mayor of Casterbridge and married to Elizabeth-Jane, his success does not ultimately lead to his happiness. At the end of the novel, the language the narrator uses to describe the union between Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane is not entirely positive: "[Elizabeth-Jane's] position was, indeed, to a marked degree one that, in the common phrase, afforded much to be thankful for. That she was not demonstratively thankful was no fault of hers" (385). The narration used to describe this happy, peaceful moment of Farfrae's and Elizabeth-Jane's lives together seems sarcastic in nature. They are expected to be happy given their marriage and relative success, but the narrator does not describe their "happy ending" as anything more than acceptance and complacency. This description of their married life is a departure from the standard description of marriage in Victorian novels. Typically in these novels, after a woman finds a successful husband to marry, the two are expected to live a blissful, happy life together within the confines and approval of society. Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae follow the archetypal trajectory set up by the marriage plot, yet the story does not end in the standard cheerful way. The ending narration is the only account readers have regarding the state of Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae's marriage, since the last event readers witness is their wedding. Since the narrator's perspective of Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane's married life is all readers learn, readers are more likely to trust the

narrator's lackluster description, since there is never a perspective given that disagrees with the assessment. By neglecting to show readers another point of view, Hardy is indicating that the narrator's point of view is the only perspective readers need, thereby compelling readers to agree with the narrator since there are no other opinions given to the contrary.

Additionally, the sardonic narration of Farfrae's marriage at the end of the novel then causes readers to reevaluate the telling of the preceding events. given that, until this point, the narrator has made readers believe Farfrae's success and happiness have been steadily increasing throughout the novel, readers are left to wonder if the narrator has misguided them; for if the seemingly happy ending is arguably not actually success, why does the narrator make it seem as though Farfrae is achieving all of his goals? Since many of the novel's complications stem from or involve the question of the narrator's reliability, one must question how readers would view the characters and the story had the novel been told from a different perspective. Would Farfrae still appear kindhearted? Would the novel still be, at a basic level, about the decline of one man as a result of his own faults?

In her article "Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge", J.B. Thompson addresses the importance of point of view in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Specifically, she evaluates Farfrae and Henchard's disagreement concerning Abel Whittle and analyzes how the readers' opinions are shaped by the way in which the scene is presented. Thompson breaks down the scene to indicate the importance of analyzing the disagreement through another perspective:

> A subtle irony in this situation is that Farfrae's motive was presumably to save a fellow worker from public humiliation, but that is exactly what he has inflicted on the proud Henchard…the older man is given no chance of saving face…considering the lack of sympathy for Henchard that Farfrae demonstrates, although well-meaning, and the destructive effects of this, one is puzzled at his suddenly being referred to as "Donald" by the end of the scene, while "Henchard" remains "Henchard" throughout. (85)

J.B. Thompson argues that the two innocents, Farfrae and Whittle, are actually the ones at fault in this scene and that readers should feel sympathy for Henchard. He faces humiliation at the hands of both men since they defy his authority in front of his workers. Yet, this reading of the scene requires "close critical scrutiny" because it goes against the typical depiction of poor victim against cruel, heartless master (Thompson 84). In the narrator's account of the scene, Whittle is referred to as "Poor Abel" and, after Whittle is allowed to get dressed, Henchard is described as a "sullen boy" (111-114). By referring to Henchard as a "sullen boy" when he does not get his way, the narrator is indicating to readers that Henchard's punishment is the result of his own childish stubbornness. His decision is not made out of rational, mature thought, but out of irrational, immature musings. By labeling Henchard in this way, the narrator is again presenting information to readers in a way that manipulates them into feeling solely negative opinions of Henchard. Now, readers believe that Henchard, the "sullen boy," is bent on humiliating others just to prove himself to other people.

When Thompson mentions the importance of the two characters being referred to as "Donald" and "Henchard", again narrative reliability is being called into question.

Prior to this encounter, Donald Farfrae is always referred to as “Farfrae”; but after the interaction the narrator begins to refer to Farfrae as “Donald”. This signifies a shift in the dynamic between the characters and Farfrae. Although not noted by Thompson, this also indicates a shift between the readers and Farfrae as a result of this narration. The use of only Farfrae’s first name shows a level of familiarity with the character that was not present before. It also signifies a changing characterization of Farfrae. Before, he was an outsider that was not fully part of the town given how recently he moved to Casterbridge. Now, the informality in the way the narrator addresses him shows that he is welcomed fully into society, and has a level of familiarity with the townspeople. When “Donald” is juxtaposed to “Henchard”, it alerts readers of the impending power shift between the two characters. Within the short time that Farfrae has been in Casterbridge he is able to reach a level of ease and assimilation that Henchard is still lacking. Although Henchard is currently the authority figure, this shift shows that Farfrae’s presence in society is growing, whereas Henchard is remaining stagnant.

The narration clearly shapes readers’ perceptions of the characters involved in the event. By referring to Farfrae as Donald, the narrator is minimizing the distance between the readers and Farfrae, creating a level of comfort and trust with Farfrae that readers still lack with Henchard. Yet, this is complicated by the narration preceding the argument concerning Whittle. Although the narration following the event seems to favor Donald, the narration preceding the argument seems to advocate for Henchard. When Whittle arrives late to work again, and Henchard threatens him, the narrator says there was “good reason” for Henchard to do so (Hardy 111). The narrator’s support of Henchard is uncommon in the novel, and thus, one must wonder why it is present in this

scene, since it is seemingly contradicted through the narration of the following confrontation. Perhaps this incongruity adds a level of complexity to the narration not previously addressed.

Another complication in narration is that while Thompson's argument that calling Whittle "poor" is Hardy's way of invoking sympathy for Whittle does hold true, the characterization of Whittle actually has a second intention that Thompson does not address. In describing Whittle, the narrator states: "Poor Abel, as he was called" (Hardy 111). Thompson is correct in the perspective that this causes readers to be sympathetic to Whittle, and side with him, even prior to his humiliation and disagreement with Henchard. However, in this quote, there is also a separation between the narrator's and the townspeople's' opinions that must be addressed. By stating, "as he was called", the narrator is distinguishing himself from the townspeople. If the narrator agreed with the pitying, sympathetic viewpoint of the town concerning Whittle, he would not have felt the need to include the clause "as he was called". Therefore, he states this as a way to show that he disagrees with the townspeople's characterization of Whittle and judges them for viewing Whittle in this way. Additionally, since this remark causes readers to agree with the townspeople and sympathize with Whittle, the narrator is also separating himself from the readers. This scene is interesting because, in this instance, the narrator is still engineering the readers' viewpoint, but is subtly indicating that he does not share the same opinion. In this scene the narrator is manipulating readers into critiquing Henchard, despite the fact that the narrator himself does not feel Henchard should be critiqued. Why then is the narrator directing readers to feel this way if it is not a viewpoint he shares? Furthermore, what does Hardy gain by separating the narrator's

opinion from the opinion of the readers that the narrator once crafted and apparently shared?

The complicated narration present throughout the narrative creates many contradictions and ambiguities in the text. The narrator's point of view seems to change at various points in the novel, and often these contradictions greatly shape how readers view the characters. The narrator's perspective on Farfrae and Henchard, as previously stated, is not consistent, which makes readers wonder about how these contradictions and evolving perspectives benefit the overall story. Since the story is told through the narrator's perspective, which is often rife with inconsistences, one could argue that Hardy's novel as a whole can be seen as a contradiction.

Even the main ideas surrounding the theme of the novel are not uniform, as made evident by one of the townspeople's remarks regarding Lucetta's stained past: "'We know the Scotchman is a right enough man, and that his lady has been a right enough 'oman since she came here, and if there was anything wrong about her afore, that's their business, not ours'" (Hardy 309). When taken in the context of the novel, this remark is incredibly ironic. Hardy makes the importance of one's past clear throughout the novel as shown by the fact that the characters are unable to escape their pasts. Henchard's past indiscretions are eventually revealed, the truth about Elizabeth-Jane is eventually learned, and Lucetta dies as a result of the exposure of her tainted past with Henchard. Additionally, readers are first introduced to Henchard by learning about his startling past. By making Henchard's past the first thing readers learn about him, Hardy is implying that the past defines Henchard more than any other aspect of his life or character. Lucetta dies after the humiliation she faces as a result of her past with

Henchard, but this too can be seen as contradicting and ironic. Not only does she die following the townsman's assertion that her past should not define her, but earlier in the novel she states, "I won't be a slave to the past, --I'll love where I choose" (Hardy 204). While at the time readers interpret her comment to be a representation of her strength and empowerment, after her death the meaning behind her statement changes drastically. Whether she is now meant to be seen as foolish and unrealistic, or tragically optimistic and naïve, one cannot know for certain.

What is obvious to readers is that the characters' beliefs, as made evident through their dialogue, do not correspond with the confining world that Hardy's novel creates. By creating characters determined to rid themselves of their pasts, and then creating a world in which their pasts destroy them, Hardy creates a work rife with deliberate irony. Additionally, Hardy's work now appears satirical and tragic in its portrayal of the characters' lives.

Satire and Tragedy

Hardy's satirical portrayal of the characters is an interesting technique, given that the novel as a whole is typically labeled as a work of realism.[1] Given that realistic writers strive to create works that present a true portrayal of life, and that satirical writers seek to make works that use humor and exaggeration to expose problems with humanity and society, it is difficult to understand how the two techniques can be fused together in this novel. Many scholars look at satire and realism as two drastically different approaches to writing. Satire uses mockery and extreme, outlandish events to prove its point to readers, whereas realism uses mimetic portrayals of characters and

[1] See W.P. Trent, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy" , Francis O'Gorman, "Thomas Hardy and Realism" and Valentine Cunningham, "Melodrama and Victorian Realist Fiction"

events to get its point across. However, Aaron Matz argues that these two techniques can intertwine in some instances and create texts that are at once both satirical and realistic::

> [In nineteenth century realism] the most forceful energies of the satiric tradition were in fact transmitted through realist channels…the exposure of folly and the disparagement of human error were no longer the province of the fantastical or boisterous style…it was realism, with its harsher, blunter, and ultimately more credible procedures and vocabulary…their equation of the ridiculous and the real made it hard to imagine a sphere different from the one represented (11).

Matz uses Hardy's work, *Jude the Obscure*, as one of his main examples of how satire and realism can coexist and work together to form a more ethical and critical novel. Specifically, he references the satirical event of Father Time's suicide and infanticide and the realistic way in which it is presented to readers. Matz argues that the event itself is entirely satirical, given that it is difficult to believe an event of this magnitude could transpire in the real world, but that in the novel it seems entirely plausible given the way in which it is described:

> [Jude the Obscure has] a radically ironic and misanthropic, perverse humor…the infanticide hovers between its debt to formal satire and its concurrent gestures towards a certain realism. One might say it is satirical in design and realistic in execution. (Matz 533-534)

Matz is saying that the satire present in *Jude the Obscure*, especially in the infanticide, is apparent because of how unfathomable the event is. Matz argues that this satire

works with realism because although the action is unbelievable, the scene is described in a very matter of fact, realistic way.

This technique in which Hardy intertwines realism and satire by portraying a satirical event in a very realistic way is present in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as well, just in a more subtle way. The most obvious example is the beginning scene in which Henchard sells his wife, but this combination of satire and realism is apparent throughout the novel as well. At the fair, when Henchard decides to sell his wife, readers are stunned and immediately pity Susan. When the narrator describes her departure with Newson and says she left "sobbing bitterly", readers feel sympathy for her and her current lot in life (Hardy 13). The tone of the scene shifts once Henchard awakens from his drunken stupor and realizes what he has done. When Henchard begins to blame Susan for the events of the previous night, the satirical nature of the events is made evident to readers because of the absurdity of his interpretation:

> On a previous occasion when [Henchard] had declared during a fuddle that he would dispose of [Susan] as he had done, she had replied that she would not hear him say that many more times before it happened, in the resigned tones of a fatalist…'Yet she knows I am not in my senses when I do that!' he exclaimed. 'Seize her, why didn't she know better than bring me into this disgrace!' he roared out. 'She wasn't queer…'tis like Susan to show such idiotic simplicity'". (Hardy 17)

The extremity of Henchard's reaction is almost comical, given that his immediate reaction is to fault Susan for his own unfathomable behavior. This quote also indicates how Hardy distinguishes between two separate modes of satire in the novel: satire of

events and satire of character. In the beginning of the novel, when Henchard sells his wife, Hardy is undoubtedly satirizing events. The notion of an individual selling his wife is entirely outlandish to readers, and thus, the events themselves are satirical. Contrarily, Henchard's viewpoint on this act represents the satirization of character. When Henchard reflects on his drunken act of selling his wife, he blames Susan for the event. He is angry and feels that she has humiliated him because she was too stupid to understand that he was not serious. Here, as a character, Henchard appears entirely satirized. His perspective is entirely ridiculous to readers, who feel Susan is a helpless victim in this event, and thus, he appears unrealistic and humorous given the fact that he takes no responsibility and faults Susan for his own actions. Both forms of satire work well in the text, and by using both forms together, Hardy makes the work more moral. It is important to note that Hardy creates a moral work that deviates from readers' typical perception of what the term moral means in Victorian novels. In defining the term moral and how it relates to works by authors such as Hardy, Aaron Matz states:

> it is undoubtedly moral , as long as we understand this word in its negative sense: I am evaluating the tendency of realist literature to be a strangely tragic protest literature, to represent people and things and conditions in a lifelike manner in order to expose their profound errors and failings.

I agree with Matz's definition of moral given that for Hardy, a moral work is not one that positively portrays a rigid, rule-bound Victorian society. Rather, his moral works expose Victorian conservatism as harsh and tragic in order to protest the failings of a society that is all too rigid in nature.

According to Matz, satire in an inherently tragic device, as made evident by how Hardy uses satire in this novel. For, if readers simply viewed Henchard as satirically comical, readers would never feel pity or sympathy for Henchard. However, since Hardy satirizes Henchard in a tragic way, readers feel sympathy, and pity, for Henchard because this satirization ultimately makes him appear pathetic rather than humorous. Thus, this interesting use of satire actually serves to further label Hardy's novels as works of tragedy. Interestingly, although this form of satire works as a tragic device, the satire actually makes it more difficult for readers to perceive the other elements of tragedy that are inherent in the novel. As formerly stated, because the novel begins with Henchard's cruel past, it is difficult to view him as the kind, successful man that the characters perceive him to be at the start of the novel's main storyline. The humorous way in which Henchard is characterized immediately following the wife-sale makes it increasingly challenging for readers to believe the later presentation of Henchard as generous town mayor.

In actuality, had the first two chapters been placed later in the novel, Henchard would actually be characterized as a sad and pitiful character. Throughout the novel, Henchard is desperate for love and success, only obtaining both for a brief period of time. It is this desperation that causes him to act irrationally and sabotage many of his relationships. However, since readers already characterize Henchard as a bad man because of the narration surround his life in the first two chapters, it is difficult for them to see him as this piteous character. In actuality, had the first two chapters not been present, Henchard could be seen as a tragic hero given that his tragic flaw leads to his downfall.

Henchard as Tragic Hero

In his essay titled “Thomas Hardy’s Tragic Hero”, Ted Spivey analyzes Hardy’s use of tragedy and, more specifically, the tragic hero. Spivey describes tragedy and the tragic hero: “The ill fortune that befalls a tragic hero is the result not only of forces working against him from without but of forces within him that hasten him toward his fall” (184). Essentially, although fate does play a role in the downfall of a tragic hero, there is also an inherent character trait that the hero possesses that accelerates his inevitable demise. According to Spivey, Henchard’s downfall is a result of the “devil within which turns awry his best plans” (Spivey 185). In this explanation of Henchard’s tragic flaw, Spivey is using language that Henchard himself uses in the novel: “’Why should I still be subject to these visitations of the devil. When I try so hard to keep him away’” (Hardy 354). But Spivey’s analysis that “the devil within” is the reason for Henchard’s downfall gives Henchard too much credibility. Spivey is taking Henchard’s analysis of his misgivings as truth and assuming Henchard’s interpretation of his own mind to be accurate. It is clear throughout the book that Henchard’s interpretation of himself and his life is not entirely truthful. There are multiple instances in the novel, such as Henchard’s reaction to the wife-sale, where, upon hearing Henchard’s account of the events, readers become dumbfounded by how bizarre his interpretation is of his actions. Therefore, for Spivey to simply agree with Henchard’s description of his main flaw is imprudent.

Rather, I think Henchard’s description of his tragic flaw is put in the novel to further illuminate what his true flaw is. When Henchard asks why he should still “be subject to visitations of the devil”, he is subtly diminishing his own accountability in his

actions. By calling his flaws “the devil”, he is giving them their own identity and persona that is entirely separate from his own. Just as he blames Susan for his wrongdoings earlier in the novel, he blames the devil for his other mistakes so that he can cling to the idea that he has changed greatly in the past ten years. Henchard’s inability to take responsibility for his actions illuminates his true tragic flaw, which is an overabundance of emotion in general. He is so desperate to prove to himself that he is a good person that he cannot admit, even to himself, that he is responsible for the things he has done. His downfall cannot be accounted for by one emotion or flaw because it is the overwhelming emotional responses Henchard has that cause his downfall. He blames the devil, the most evil being, for his faults, because he is so overly emotional and dramatic that he identifies with the single most evil being.

A key example of his excess emotions causing his downfall is his relationship with Elizabeth-Jane. When Newson returns to find Elizabeth-Jane, Henchard becomes terrified that Elizabeth-Jane will no longer want to have a relationship with him. As a result, he immediately lies to Newson and claims that Elizabeth-Jane has died:

> Then Henchard, scarcely believing the evidence of his senses, rose from his seat amazed at what he had done…the regard he had lately acquired for Elizabeth, the new sprung hope of his loneliness that she would be to him a daughter…had been stimulated by the unexpected coming of Newson to a greedy exclusiveness in relation to her; so that the sudden prospect of her loss had caused him to speak mad lies like a child. (Hardy 338)

Unlike in the beginning of the novel, Henchard realizes the consequences of his actions, but is unable to fix his impulsive mistake. Throughout the novel Henchard acts out of

sheer emotion, because his emotions overpower him and cause him to be unable to think rationally. He lies to Newson about Elizabeth-Jane's death, which indicates his excessive fear, loneliness and love. Additionally, Henchard has the opportunity to explain himself and his actions to Elizabeth-Jane but chooses not to, indicating his excessive pride:

> Henchard's lips half parted to begin an explanation. But he shut them up like a vice, and uttered not a sound. How should he, there and then, set before her with any effect the palliatives of his great faults…waiving therefore, his privilege of self-defense, he regarded only her discomposure. 'Don't ye distress yourself on my account,' he said, with a proud superiority…'I'll never trouble 'ee again, Elizabeth-Jane—no, not to my dying day!'". (Hardy 377)

Although he loves Elizabeth-Jane and wants her in his life, he is incapable of controlling his excessive pride, and is thereby never able to regain a relationship with her. In this instance, Henchard appears pathetic to readers. He interrupts Elizabeth-Jane's wedding to express his love and remorse, but is then so overwhelmed that he is incapable of doing so and leaves the wedding feeling completely alone. By illustrating Henchard in this way, Hardy is trying to evoke readers' sympathy for Henchard.

Once Henchard's tragic flaw is identified as excessive emotions, his role in the novel becomes more evident. Since Henchard is a satirical character, this excess could be read as an element of this satirization. Perhaps Hardy makes Henchard's excess of emotion his tragic flaw to make Henchard an exaggeration of humanity in general. All of the emotions Henchard feels are justifiable given the circumstances of his life: fear, worry, pride, loneliness, etc. are all universal emotions and common responses to life's

difficulties. Since Henchard's downfall stems from the fact that he displays these emotions too intensely, he can be seen as a satirical exaggeration of all people. In this light, readers' judgments of Henchard are incredibly ironic for, in actuality, they are judging a character that Hardy has created to be indicative of them.

According to Spivey, tragic heroes face their downfalls because of their own internal faults, as well as because of the inescapable pull of fate (183). Thus, to see Henchard as a tragic hero, one must believe that Henchard is fated to fall and that his flaws only make his downfall occur more quickly. Since Henchard's downfall is a result of the excess of his own character, it is important to take into account that he is satirical representation of humanity as a whole. From this regard, if fate does play a role in Henchard's downfall, is Hardy using this satirization of character to arguing that, if not checked, society as a whole is fated to fall?

Character and Fate

Hardy is known for emphasizing the role of fate in his novels and, more specifically, in the downfall of his characters. In novels such as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy often mentions the past, fate, and evil outside forces, as if they are all transpiring against his main characters Tess and Jude. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for example, when describing Tess's rape, the narrator states, "Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue…there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive…As Tess's own people…are never tired of saying…'It was to be."" (Hardy 74). By stating Tess is "doomed" and declaring that "it was to be" the narrator is indicating that her rape is fated to happen. Hardy's cynical, fatalist viewpoint is similarly illustrated in *Jude the Obscure.* Jude's dream is to

eventually go to Christminster and he spends his entire life striving to make this dream a reality. Unfortunately, this just leads to his eventual loss of hope given his inability to ever actually go to the college: “Those building and their associations and privileges were not for him…he saw that his destiny lay not with these, but among the manual toiler in the shabby purlieu which he himself occupied” (Hardy 119). By referring to Jude’s destiny, Hardy is indicating that his future has already been laid out for him, regardless of any choices he makes. He is fated for the bleak life he has and is unable to change his circumstances. Both Tess and Jude face great suffering that seems entirely unavoidable. Contrarily, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard’s suffering is constantly characterized as being the result of his own actions. Hardy initially exposes readers to the tragedy behind Henchard’s character, rather than the tragedy behind his life circumstances as he does with Jude and Tess, which could perhaps be indicative of a departure from Hardy’s typical fatalism.

If Henchard is the primary reason for his own decline, he cannot be seen as an archetypical tragic hero, because fate is apparently not involved. However, it becomes clear that to Hardy, character, nature and fate are all intertwined: “But most probably luck had little to do with it. Character is Fate, said Novalis” (Hardy 131). By stating that “character is fate”, Hardy is explaining that Henchard is fated for his tragic downfall because his nature is destined to cause his own ruin. This quote not only reaffirms Henchard’s status as a tragic hero, but also serves to further complicate Hardy as a fatalist. While in the other novels, the role of fate is clear, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* fate is a much more ambiguous concept. Now, fate can be working as an internal force, since one’s character is the defining force of one’s fate. This can also explain Hardy’s

reasoning for introducing readers to Henchard ten years before the primary events of the novel. By keeping the events of the fair as the first two chapters of the novel, Hardy is ensuring that the way readers first see Henchard is as a ruined man responsible for his own hardships. If the novel would have begun at the height of Henchard's success, then readers would firstly see him as a successful, strong leader, and thus it would be difficult to understand how his character causes his fated downfall.

Hardy also skips the ten years between the fair and when Henchard becomes Mayor because they are not key to the theme and moral of the novel. By skipping over how Henchard becomes successful, Hardy is allowing readers to surmise multiple possibilities regarding the events of those ten years of Henchard's life. Whether his path to success is challenging or easy is inconsequential because Hardy is illustrating that it does not matter how or when the main character becomes successful, because he is always destined to again become a failure. By not providing any information, positive or negative, about Henchard during this period, Hardy is shaping readers' perspectives because by skipping the ten years, Hardy is making readers believe that time period in Henchard's life is inconsequential. Additionally, by neglecting to tell readers what has occurred in this ten year period, after just allowing them to see into a detailed moment of Henchard's past, Hardy is making readers believe that the wife-sale is more important than any other moment in Henchard's past. Hardy then skips ten years to allow Henchard a period of brief success, indicating to readers that he is capable of changing and prospering in life. Just as Jude is allowed a brief period of success in which he thinks he will be able to pursue his dream of studying at Christminster, Henchard is allowed a brief period of success in which he feels he has overcome his

misfortunes, beaten the forces of fate, and truly changed. While the beginning of the novel makes readers less sympathetic for Henchard during his downfall, it also makes his downfall more tragic because it serves to show that the success Henchard experienced in life is an anomaly because he will always be fated to be at the bottom of society.

Character and Function

In “The One vs. the Many”, Alex Woloch analyzes how our perceptions of characters are formed: “The space of a particular character emerges only vis-à-vis the other characters that crowd him out or potentially revolve around him. It is precisely here that the social dimension of form emerges, revolving around the inflection rather than the simple reflection of characters” (18). Although Woloch mainly focuses on the function and purpose of minor characters, he also discusses how they relate to main characters as well. Woloch argues that all characters are shaped by their interactions with the other characters in the novel. Therefore, Henchard is shaped not only by the narrator’s viewpoint and Henchard’s own actions and thoughts, but also by how he interacts with the rest of the characters. This is made most evident by his relationship with the townspeople. Although readers rarely learn the thoughts and feelings of the townspeople, it is clear that the town likes Farfrae more than Henchard. Thus, the townspeople serve the function of further shaping readers’ opinions surrounding both men.

The difference between characters as individuals and characters as functions is an idea that Woloch explores. In evaluating the extent to which characters exist as realistic individuals and the extent to which they exist as representations of greater

themes, Woloch states the difference to essentially be “the tension between the authenticity of a character in-and-of-himself and the reduction of the character into the thematic or symbolic field” (15). It is difficult to see characters as both functions and individuals, given that in order to write a character as a function, the character oftentimes must become less believable as an individual. Although Woloch is primarily discussing minor characters, Henchard’s character makes this tension apparent as well. Though beginning with Henchard’s past better serves Hardy and the novel’s thematic goals, it lessens the ability for readers to view Henchard as an authentic individual. This is because Hardy introduces Henchard to the readers during a pivotal and shocking, moment in Henchard’s lifetime. Thus, it is challenging for the reader to view Henchard as a fully formed and believable character in that moment because all readers know about Henchard is the outlandish event of the wife-sale. However, this introduction to Henchard highlights the novel’s themes of the past and inescapable fate and helps to shape Henchard’s future function in the novel. Does the fact that Hardy chooses to start the novel this way, knowing the result, mean that he values Henchard as a representation of ideas more than as his own individual character? And if so, does that mean that Henchard must serve to function as more than just a character, since this introduction is most beneficial to the story’s themes?

James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz argue that all characters can be seen as mimetic, synthetic, or thematic. Synthetic characters are artificial in nature, and are not seen as realistic portrayals of people, whereas mimetic characters are meant to be realistic portrayals of individuals in society. Thematic characters are created to represent larger ideas and themes present in the work (111).

They go on to further explain how the three components function together within a work of literature. Not all characters can be characterized solely by one of the three categories and many characters could be indicative of all of the categories at different points in the work:

> The mimetic and synthetic components are often (though not always) on a seesaw. When a progression increases our interest in one, it tends to decrease our interest in the other…Furthermore, one typical consequence of an author's foregrounding the synthetic component of character is the heightening of our interest in the thematic. (113)

Hardy's choice to expose readers to Henchard's backstory initially exposes Henchard's synthetic component. By introducing readers to Henchard as the man who sold his wife, it becomes difficult for readers to see Henchard as a potentially real person because they are introduced to him through an unrealistic and incomprehensible event. Thus, in that instance he could be seen as a synthetic character since he appears to be artificially constructed within the confines of the story-world.[2] Yet, in Henchard's reactions following the wife-sale, Henchard is portrayed as a mimetic character as a result of his thought process. He is more believable as an individual capable of selling his wife throughout the second chapter, because his complicated and bitter psychology makes his actions more plausible. By cementing Henchard as a character with both synthetic and mimetic components in the first two chapters, readers become much more interested in the thematic components of Henchard and of the novel in general.

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[2] See also *Narrative Form* by Suzanne Keen.

Readers are left to wonder about Hardy's intent in choosing such a cruel and complicated character to focus the plot around.

Henchard is undoubtedly a very unlikely protagonist for the novel, which causes readers to evaluate how they should label the rest of the characters as well. The most difficult label to address is the antagonist. From Henchard's perspective, the novel's antagonist could be every other character because he has felt, at some point in the novel, that they have each been transpiring against him. In the beginning, the antagonist is Susan because she humiliates him when she leaves him for Newson.[3] Later, the antagonist becomes Farfrae because he is more successful in business and society than Henchard is and thus, poses a threat. Lucetta and even Elizabeth-Jane act as antagonists in Henchard's eyes at points in the novel because they do not bend to his will and wishes. Conversely, from the narrator's perspective, none of these characters truly act as the novel's antagonist because Henchard acts as his own antagonist. An example of this is after Henchard fires Farfrae at Farfrae's town event, when the narrator describes Henchard's viewpoint on the events that have transpired:

> Henchard, who had been hurt at finding that Farfrae did not mean to put up with his temper any longer, was incensed beyond measure when he learnt what the young man had done as an alternative. It was in the town hall…that he first became aware of Farfrae's coup for establishing himself independently …his voice might have been heard as far as the town-pump…those tones showed that, though under a long reign of self-control…there was still the same unruly

[3] On page 17 of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, when discussing the wife-sale, the narrator states that Henchard must "put up with the shame as best he could".

> volcanic stuff beneath the rind of Michael Henchard as when he had sold his wife at Weydon Fair. (Hardy 129)

The narrator's language makes it clear that he feels Henchard is the sole force working against himself. Even in Farfrae's decision to compete with Henchard in business, the narrator chooses to focus on Henchard's temper and rage more than on any of Farfrae's potential motives surrounding his decision to establish himself in the town. When describing Farfrae's decision, the narrator references the events from the beginning of the novel. When comparing the two, the only similarity the narrator draws is Henchard and his volatile personality. By referencing two key events surrounding Henchard's downfall and insinuating that Henchard's bad temperament is the only thing the two have in common, the narrator is indicating that Henchard plays the role of his own antagonist. Additionally, by recalling an event that has previously caused readers to feel distain towards Henchard, the protagonist is eliciting the same negative feelings from the readers. This causes them to feel irritation over Henchard's irrationality and volatility rather than sympathy over Henchard's loss of his only friend and confidant.

The Role of Comedy

The distinction between the narrator's portrayal and Henchard's portrayal of events throughout the novel are, at points, comical. The narrator is able to recognize that Henchard is the reason behind his own misfortunes, whereas Henchard stubbornly refuses to realize he is at fault. Henchard's unwavering child-like stubbornness throughout the novel is what makes him appear so comical in the eyes of the readers. In *Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse*, J.K. Lloyd Jones compares tragedy and comedy to explore how comic elements could be present in Hardy's works: "Without doubt there

is much to amuse in Hardy's works: the distinctive wry tone of the narrator of the stories…the satirical and whimsical verses, and the farcical situations in the plots" (Jones 2). Jones mentions narrative tone, satire, and the ridiculous nature of events that occur in Hardy's works as indications that elements of comedy are present in his novels. This is made evident towards the end of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, after Farfrae has become mayor and Henchard has lost favor with the town. After Farfrae publically reprimands Henchard for trying to drunkenly greet the royal personage, Henchard decides to fight Farfrae in private with the intent of killing him. The elements of tragedy at work in this scene are apparent, given Henchard's desperation in his attempt to reassert his dominance over Farfrae, but upon closer analysis the elements of comedy are present as well. The scene's basic breakdown is as follows: The drunken protagonist is told to go home because he is humiliating the town. This causes him to lash out, and thus, he seeks to murder a man who was once his only friend in town. However, he realizes that, since he is much larger than the other man, he must find a way to make the future fight fair. The protagonist then ties down one of his arms, because he wants to be kind to his antagonist in his plot to kill him (Hardy 312-313). When logically thinking about the events that transpire in this scene, the scene itself becomes comical. Henchard's actions and thought processes concerning his confrontation of Farfrae are absurd, and it is this absurdity that causes readers to find this climactic moment in Farfrae and Henchard's relationship to be humorous. Henchard's faulty logic, impulsive actions and subsequent regret cause readers to evaluate Henchard as a character. For, by presenting comical events and then presenting tragic results, Hardy is creating a type of heartrending humor that indicates

how pathetic Henchard's life has become. The contradicting elements work well together in this scene because they serve to show the contradicting elements of Henchard's character; he is at once absurd and sympathetic, pathetic and ridiculous. One wonders if Henchard has truly changed since the beginning chapters, as indicated by his attempts to better himself, or if he remains the same prideful, aggressive man, and has just become more pitiful in his downfall.

By having elements of comedy and tragedy both present in this scene, Hardy is further distorting readers' interpretation of the novel and its meaning. It becomes increasingly challenging for readers to know how to perceive and interpret the world that Hardy has created, because they are unsure how to label the novel as a whole. In his ironic simplification of comedy and tragedy, Lord Byron differentiates the two by stating that "All tragedies are finished by a death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage" (Byron, IX). This statement makes it easy to distinguish between the two forms—In Shakespeare's plays for example; this statement is always the case. Hardy chooses to complicate this statement with the ending of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Within the last five pages of the novel, Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae are, at last, married. Elizabeth-Jane is reunited with Newson shortly before her marriage, and they all dance and rejoice in the ceremony. Sadly, shortly following the marriage, Henchard dies an incredibly tragic death: dying alone, without money, family, or love (383). Therefore, Hardy's novel ends with both a marriage and a death, further indicating that it can be viewed as both a comedy and a tragedy. How then are readers supposed to understand the novel and Hardy's intentions in writing it?

Complications in Hardy

According to Jones, Hardy often felt that critiques misrepresented him and misjudged his works (1). Perhaps this frustration stemmed from critics' tendency to type-cast him and his novels. For, by constantly seeking to label Hardy and his works as simply tragic or comic, critics neglect to analyze many aspects of Hardy's works and simplify the intentional complicated and convoluted elements that make Hardy's works intriguing.

The ability to view *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and its elements from different perspectives is undoubtedly intentional. The novel's point of view, narration, and character development are all challenging to comprehend fully. Additionally, the characters themselves and the roles they play are difficult for readers to grasp. Just as the narrator and Henchard appear to have opposing views regarding the protagonist and antagonist of the novel, readers do as well. In 2010, Carroll, Johnson, Gottschall, Kruger and Georgiades performed a study in which they had two websites with two separate questionnaires. One questionnaire was on multiple novels from the Victorian era, and the other was specifically on *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The purpose of both studies was to ask qualified respondents to label each of the characters either as protagonist, antagonist, friend to protagonist or friend to antagonist, and to then specify the characterization and motives of each character. After labeling the characters in this way, respondents were then asked to describe their own emotional feelings towards each of the characters. The multi-novel website served a greater purpose of providing a generic baseline of data to compare the results of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to (169-173).

Overall, the findings concluded that the consensus level in assigning roles to each of the characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was low at only 69% in comparison to 81% for the other novels. Although 88% of respondents identify Henchard as the protagonist, the descriptions given in regards to his motives and personality were in line with the descriptions given of the other novels' antagonists. Additionally, since Henchard is often in conflict with Farfrae and with Newson, both are identified as antagonists, although their motives and personality correlated with the protagonists of the other novels (175). Although many may argue with the study's results, given that protagonists are not always likeable in nature and antagonists are not always unlikeable in nature, during the time period in which Hardy was writing, these terms and the character traits associated with them were relatively stagnant. This is made evident by the commonality in the descriptions of the protagonist and antagonist among the other 100 novels. Thus, the survey also indicates that Hardy's decision to write a novel with an unlikeable protagonist and two likeable antagonists is unusual for the time period.

The study highlights the peculiarity of *The Mayor of Casterbridge's* structure as a whole and stresses the difficulty readers face in comprehending Farfrae's role in the novel. He is labeled as antagonist, not because of his characterization, but because of how the protagonist views him. Since Farfrae does not easily fit the role of antagonist, perhaps one must reevaluate Henchard's role as protagonist.

It is easy to immediately label Henchard as the novel's protagonist for three reasons: firstly, he is the first character readers are introduced to, secondly, he is identified as the Mayor of Casterbridge, and thus is the title character, and thirdly, readers are given more access to his thoughts and motives than to any of the other

characters. If one of the main reasons for Henchard's label as protagonist is the first two chapters of the novel, one again must wonder what would have happened if they were removed. Additionally, it is peculiar that while the past is such an important theme in this novel, readers never learns Farfrae's backstory. All that readers learn about Farfrae is that he is originally from Scotland and has plans to go to America (52). Farfrae's past is never brought up again, and none of the townspeople question why he left Scotland. None of the other characters can escape their past, whereas Farfrae's past is never mentioned. Why does Hardy withhold Farfrae's backstory and highlight Henchard's? What would have happened if Henchard's backstory were removed and replaced with Farfrae's? Would readers still label Henchard as the protagonist and Farfrae as the antagonist?

According to Woloch, minor characters and their less consequential roles in the narrative serve to complicate the overall meaning behind the story:

> Any character *can* be a protagonist, but only one character is…on the one hand, the asymmetric structure of realist characterization—which rounds out one or several characters while flattening and distorting, a manifold assortment of characters—reflects actual structures of inequitable distribution. On the other hand, the *claims* of minor characters on the reader's attention—and the resultant tension between characters and their functions—are generated by the democratic impulse that forms a horizon of nineteenth-century politics. (31)

Within the context of Woloch, Henchard is still more easily labeled as the novel's protagonist given that the story centers on him and his thoughts. But, Farfrae could easily be the novel's protagonist, given Woloch's argument that any minor character

could theoretically be the story's center. Instead, Hardy chooses to make Farfrae a flat character. To readers, Farfrae lacks depth, complex thoughts, and a backstory, yet, readers still like Farfrae. Since the narrator withholds a lot of information regarding Farfrae's life, all of the readers' feelings towards Farfrae are shaped by his actions and the narrator's thoughts surrounding these actions. Thus, readers are not concerned that they do not know much about Farfrae because they are engineered to fully trust and value the flat character that Hardy has created. Although in comparison to Henchard, Farfrae is the less developed character, within the confines of the story-world, Farfrae is the more impactful character. This is made most evident by the end of the novel, in which the townspeople are continuing their daily life, governed by Farfrae, relatively unaffected by Henchard's removal of himself from society. Although readers view Farfrae as an underdeveloped character, the other characters do not. To the townspeople, Farfrae is a fully developed, trusted and respected man. Woloch does not distinguish between the readers' labels and the characters' labels of flat and round characters. By this I mean that although the narrative makes Farfrae a minor character in the eyes of the readers, to the townspeople, Farfrae is actually the major character, given his level of authority and responsibility. By complicating Woloch's distinction between minor and major characters in this way, the narrator's reliability again complicates the text. Perhaps the narrator intentionally skews the novel's perspective to derive an entirely different meaning for the novel. By this I mean to conjecture that if the narration surrounding the novel is biased, the focus of the narration could be biased as well. Perhaps the narrator's critical fixation on Henchard is not actually because he's the novel's sole protagonist. Rather, by focusing and judging one character so intently, the

novel's moral and intent is changed from what it would be had the novel's focus been more comprehensive.

Many would argue that, regardless of narration, Henchard is undoubtedly the protagonist since he the title character. However, what if Hardy intentionally made the novel's title misleading? Henchard is not the only Mayor of Casterbridge, he is simply the first Mayor of Casterbridge. For the second half of the novel, Farfrae is the Mayor of Casterbridge. Therefore, it is actually unclear who the title character is, since the title could be referring to either of the two men. Some may argue that this argument cannot hold given that the novel's subtitle: "The Life and Death of a Man of Character" must refer to Henchard since he is the only man that dies. However, what if the death is meant as a symbolic death? The subtitle does not say "Life and Death of a Man", but "Life and Death of a Man of Character". Perhaps the meaning is the death of an individual's strong and noble character. From this perspective, the title character could still be either man.

Although Henchard's downfall makes it easy to label him as the man who loses his character, Farfrae changes as well, just in a more subtle way:

> Farfrae was still liked in the community; but it must be owned that, as the Mayor and man of money, engrossed with affairs and ambitions, he had lost in the eyes of the poorer inhabitants something of that wondrous charm. (309)

In this passage, Hardy is indicating that Farfrae has changed as a character. He is no longer the same loveable and charismatic man because his ambitions and greed have altered his personality. As previously mentioned, this is made further apparent by the fact that Farfrae begins to compete with Henchard for business, despite his initial

protests that he cannot due to their past friendship. Although Farfrae's decision to go directly against Henchard in business is understandable, it is still a deviation from his previous mentality, thus indicating that Farfrae has changed due to his desire to prosper economically. Additionally, since the narrator's critique of Farfrae is not apparent until the end of the novel, this could indicate that Farfrae has changed, and thus, now deserves criticism. Thus, the narrator is signifying that Farfrae is not the same man of character he was in the beginning of the novel. An important distinction to make is that this marked change in Farfrae's character is only due to the biased narration that surrounds him. For, if the narrator had written about Farfrae's initial encounter with Henchard, and Farfrae's decision to help him, in a way that highlighted Farfrae's potential arrogance, readers wouldn't believe that Farfrae has changed at all. Rather, they would feel that the townspeople are finally recognizing Farfrae as the self-centered and egotistical man that readers, and the narrator, have already deemed him to be. However, regardless of whether this death of character encompasses a level of change, it is important to note that the complexity surrounding Farfrae and his questionable character is still a result of untrustworthy narration. Conceivably, the novel's title and subtitle could be regarding Farfrae or Henchard, but it is never outwardly indicated. This leaves readers to wonder what Hardy has gained through this evident elusiveness. For readers to identify Farfrae as the title character, they would first have to recognize that Farfrae is not truly a man of character. Since the narrator has shaped readers into believing Farfrae is a selfless and kind individual, readers are unable to evaluate Farfrae's character, and thus the subtitle, fully.

The Reflection on Hardy's Readership

As a result of the narrator's manipulation of the readers' perspectives, readers are unable to recognize the ambiguities that are apparent throughout the text. Conceivably, Hardy creates a misguided, judgmental narrator to mirror readers who Hardy feels are overly judgmental and misguided themselves. Satire is undoubtedly used throughout the novel as a way for Hardy to criticize the events and the characters in the novel. Perhaps Hardy also uses satire to criticize the readers. In both satirization of events and satirization of character, the narration plays a large role in shaping the plot to appear absurd and humorous. Perhaps narration plays such a big role in the satire of this novel because the narration itself is also satirized in order to heighten and emphasize the satirical events and characters present throughout the novel.

Thus, the narrator's excessive criticism of Henchard actually serves a greater purpose. While readers believe the narrator's lack of sympathy is founded, given Henchard's past, Hardy actually creates this unsympathetic narrator as a way to condemn society for their overly judgmental nature. Just as authors can use third-person narrators to create distance from the protagonist and the story-world in order to critique it, authors can also use third-person narrators to create distance from the readers in order to critique them as well. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy is subtly doing this by creating a narrator whose overcritical viewpoint of Henchard is actually meant to be satirical.

The narrator's critical view rebounds on the reader to reflect their own cruel judgments and then fault them for it . Accordingly, the narrator is overly critical of Henchard in order to critique society for continuing to judge the protagonist despite his

constant attempts to change. Since the readers emphatically agree with the narrator's portrayal of Henchard, Hardy is actually condemning them for being unable to recognize the cruel extremity of the narrator's portrayal of the protagonist. From this regard, Hardy's decision to initially introduce Henchard as a synthetic character makes sense, because Hardy does not want Henchard to appear entirely realistic. By making Henchard a somewhat synthetic character, Hardy is making it easier for readers to judge Henchard and agree with the narrator. There is now an increased distance between Henchard and the readers since they do not feel he is fully representative of a real individual. Thus, Hardy uses this synthetic component to amplify the novel's overall purpose of ridiculing readers for their unnecessarily harsh perspective. Hardy makes it easy for readers to become judgmental, and then faults them for doing so. By creating a hypercritical narrator, Hardy is inviting readers to be faultfinding as well. By then satirizing this perspective throughout the novel, Hardy is disparaging readers for agreeing with the narrator and adopting this viewpoint of Henchard in the first place.

Similarly, when the narrator is overly admiring of Farfrae, it is actually only to critique society's overly enthusiastic response to Farfrae's presence in the town. He assimilates so quickly into the town simply because he is the exciting new outsider in an otherwise ordinary town. The narrator's overly positive description of Farfrae is actually meant to mock the townspeople for becoming enraptured with Farfrae, despite knowing nothing about him and his past. Therefore, since readers agree with the townspeople, and the narrator's, representation of Farfrae, Hardy is mocking them as well.

From this perspective, the inconsistencies in narration throughout the text are intentionally present as a way for Hardy to indicate his own true feelings towards

Henchard and the other characters. Hardy waits until the end of the novel to outwardly criticize Farfrae, because by doing so, the novel culminates in its critique of readers for being judgmental and biased throughout the novel's entirety.

Hardy essentially punishes readers for attempting to identify the work, its characters, and its moral prematurely. Hardy makes it easy for readers to immediately label *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and its characters, especially in regards to their roles as protagonist and antagonist. The first two chapters invite readers to judge and blame Henchard, since he is an alcoholic who sells his family. Likewise, the introduction to Farfrae makes it easy for readers to deem him the noble character within the confines of a town of many flawed individuals. Yet, by the end of the novel, it becomes clear how wrong readers were for making these judgments surrounding the characters.

Hardy also uses satire and comedy to distort the label of tragedy that critics and readers were so apt to give his works. By using the contradicting elements of satire and realism, and tragedy and comedy, Hardy is again being critical of readers for making assumptions surrounding his works. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy takes the bound forms commonly associated with the time period and manipulates them. As a result he not only creates a highly complex work, but also further highlights his overall discontent with society.

Hardy combines multiple elements to create works that are at once realistic and unrealistic, moral and immoral. The subtly of the techniques Hardy uses in his novels further indicate the complexity of his writing. Hardy tells the story of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* solely through the eyes of unreliable individuals, as both the characters and the narrator are untrustworthy. Readers are left confused by the ambiguity

surrounding character roles, especially in considering the role of the protagonist. Additionally, Hardy uses satirical, tragic and comic elements throughout the story, making it even more challenging to understand his intent in writing this novel. By taking the traditional story-telling elements and distorting them, Hardy is intentionally making the novel challenging for readers to fully grasp. Hardy is undoubtedly incredibly critical of strict Victorian society, and by twisting traditional literary techniques and elements, Hardy is indicating the unnecessary strictness of society. This is further indicated by the fact that although Hardy's writing is free, the world in which he is writing about is not. Although Hardy is able to accommodate characters that do not fit in traditional molds, the town is unable to. Whittle is an outcaste, Henchard is tossed aside and forgotten once his role as mayor is filled by someone else, Lucetta is essentially killed because of her affair, etc. Thus, by juxtaposing a novel that breaks labels in every aspect, with a novel that seems unable to accept any individual that breaks convention, Hardy creates a work with immense moral authority.

The novel's unconventional morality reaches its climax at the very end of the novel, as a result of the complicated ending. Not only is there finally negative narration surrounding Farfrae, but there is also finally positive narration surrounding Henchard. For Henchard, success means control and authority over other individuals. Ironically, at the end of the novel it is actually Henchard who achieves success and his happy-ending. For, in his death, Henchard finally exhibits control over Farfrae, who has to carry out Henchard's wishes despite his own desire to mourn him. Thus, in Hardy's perverse way, Henchard finally achieves his goals, indicating that he is yet again a man of character. Therefore, Farfrae could be seen as the true title character, since his

character is the one called into question at the end of the novel. As a result, readers must come to the reluctant realization that they were guilty of making rash judgments throughout the novel, and as such, are the very individuals that Hardy created the novel for as a means to critique and ridicule.

Through this work it becomes clear that Hardy's true complexity as an author is never fully grasped by his readers. The subtly of Hardy's satirical narrator and the other techniques Hardy employs further indicate both his sympathy towards unconventional characters, and his critique of his readers for being as intolerant as the fictitious townspeople he writes about. Like the townspeople, readers are unable to excuse Henchard for his past, indicating their support of an unforgiving society that values the notion that individuals should never err. This is further indicated by the readers' inability to pity Lucetta and her untimely death because to readers, she is a fallen woman worthy of judgment. Lastly, by being blinded by Farfrae's supposed honorable motives, readers are buying into the fantasy that an individual is capable of having no faults. The narrator invites readers into this narrow-minded, judgmental, and idealistic view of society but leaves subtle indications throughout the novel that this view is inaccurate. This therefore allows Hardy to be even more critical of his readers, who are unable to dispel their pretentious and critical viewpoint. Readers chose to label these alterations in the narrator's perspective as mere inconsistencies in narration that can be overlooked in favor of the larger and less accepting picture that the narrator paints. Hardy uses the narrator to expose his judgment towards an unnecessarily disparaging society and readership. As such, the readers' inability to recognize that this novel is rife with satire only serves to prove Hardy's point that the narrow-minded nature of society makes

people incapable of ever truly understanding Hardy's works or, unfortunately, their own faults.

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